

CHAPTER 9

SIGNIFICANCE OF DELAWARE CANNERY SITES

CANNERIES DOMINATED DELAWARE'S ECONOMY before World War II. At the end of the twentieth century, few still stand, mostly derelict, all altered. As surviving canneries disappear, they receive scant attention from the public or from preservation planners.

Delaware historians traditionally ignore canning. No canning-related event was mentioned in Jeannette Eckman's Delaware chronology, which still is cited as a basis for preservation planning (Herman and Siders 1986: 168-181). This traditional-style historical list contains many entries for events in other industries, as well as for such landmark events in Delaware history as Aaron Burr's three-day visit to Wilmington and the death of Hezekiah Niles. It is entertaining and quaint, but as a tool for historical planning, the Eckman chronology is itself a dated intellectual artifact.

The place of manufacturing in the State Plan

Industry is not a major Delaware preservation planning focus. The manufacturing theme is the state plan's third-ranked priority for above-ground sites, and is seventh-ranked among below-ground priorities. Even at this level, the plan excludes all but one narrow local aspect of the industry theme: "*Manufacturing is included because it was the economic rationale for the development of early Wilmington and continued to play a major role there throughout the nineteenth century.*" (Ames, Callahan, Herman and Siders 1989:80) Downstate manufacturing, by implication, is not among the state's preservation priorities. Moreover, this statement demotes all manufacturing to the status of a subordinate contributor to the main theme of settlement patterns in one corner of the state.

The plan's list of priority chronological periods for below-ground resources extends no later than the "early industrialization" period of 1770-1830, which predates the beginning of downstate industrialization (Ames, Callahan, Herman and Siders 1989:81).

Æsthetic Bias in the State Preservation Plan

Æsthetic bias may have influenced the authors' decision to exclude canneries from preservation planning consideration, and to downgrade manufacturing.

Professional and amateur preservationists [those who are not industrial historians as well] traditionally favor the more picturesque industrial sites, notably water-powered grist mills. Grist mills are not nearly as significant as canneries in Delaware history, however.

Canneries in Delaware have historically outproduced grist mills, and canning has been a much larger industry than flour milling, but canneries are scarcely represented in the state's historical inventories. The only cannery on the National Register is totally gutted, preserving only the architectural finery of an atypically elegant brick building.

The 1974 Delaware Historic Preservation Plan described only this one cannery but discussed and described about twenty sites associated with grist mills. Fifteen years later, the 1989 State Historic Preservation Plan lists about the same proportion of grist mill-related sites versus canneries now on the National Register.

Even specialist industrial surveys emphasize other industries. Canning was represented in the 1974 Historic American Engineering Record survey by just two Kent County sites: Richardson and Robbins and the 1870-1956 Sheldrake cannery in Harrington; there were ten grist mills on the list. Two other canneries have recently been subjected to archæological investigation under the Delaware Department of Transportation program: those at Lebanon and Flemings Landing.

This tilt in favor of the more picturesque milling sites distorts the relative importance of the two industries. By the end of the Lebanon plant's existence, canning had grown to become Delaware's second largest industry, after shipbuilding. Scharf in 1888 listed 33 food canning and preserving establishments in Delaware, with 1044 hands, or 12% of the state's manufacturing workforce. By contrast, 81 flour and grist mills employed only 220 hands (Scharf 1888:401). During the next half-century, canning would grow considerably and milling would diminish even farther. By 1912, Delaware canned a tenth of the nation's tomatoes, 1,400,000 cases. In 1935, Delaware ranked as the second tomato canning state in the nation, with plants in thirty communities (Passmore 1978:80).

Delaware is endowed with cultural resources to correct this imbalance in the record, both above and below ground. Dover, for example, contains three former cannery buildings. Best-known is the elegant but gutted Richardson and Robbins cannery of 1881; other, less picturesque, canneries have not been so prominently mentioned. The former Romeo tomato-products cannery on North Street is now a

trucking terminal. Spence's Bazaar is a former cannery, moved from Flemings Landing and re-erected on South Street. Most of the old canning towns retain some vestiges of the industry, including a number of buildings still in use for other purposes.

Geographical bias in the State Historic Preservation Plan

Geographical bias also has worked against adequate attention to canning. Historic preservation planning in Delaware, as it relates to industry, focuses inordinate attention on the Brandywine Valley.

Viewed from the perspective of their times, the Brandywine industries had less economic value to the state and less impact on the national economy than the agricultural industries of Kent and Sussex counties. It is therefore unrealistic to include manufacturing among state preservation planning priorities merely because of its importance in Wilmington, or to regard Wilmington as the sole focus of Delaware industrial history worthy of planning consideration.

The state plan preserves and perpetuates regional bias with such statements as "Northern Delaware's watershed valleys were also the setting for major inventions and developments in the industrial revolution. In response to these broad land use trends, historical research on Delaware's place in regional economics has examined grain and animal agriculture on a statewide basis and manufacturing in the Piedmont region." This statement contains truth, but it hardly enunciates the statewide overview of economic history that it purports to promote, nor does it correctly assess the state of knowledge. The plan identifies a group of "important largely unexplored aspects of Delaware's regional economic history," consisting of "forestry, shipbuilding, highways, railroads, household manufactures, and other agricultural endeavors such as tobacco and truck farming." (Ames, Callahan, Herman and Siders 1989:91) Again, canning is not mentioned.

Although upstate technologists have made contributions, it is unfair to mention them to the exclusion of the inventors and innovators who worked in Delaware's agricultural industries. On at least four different occasions, major technological innovations from Delaware have profoundly changed the nation's diet. Yet downstate agriculture-related industries continue to fall between the cracks of preservation planning. In view of the rapid erosion of food-industry cultural resources, it is difficult to embrace a preservation planning scheme that ignores a central feature of Delaware society during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.